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ABSTRACT

This digest provides information to help teachers gain a better understanding of Asian-American children, particularly those from East and Southeast Asian cultures, and identify culturally appropriate educational practices to use with these children. Asian-Americans represent more than 29 distinct subgroups who differ in language, religion, and customs. In addition to these between-group differences, diversity exists within national groups and among individuals. Nevertheless, Asian-Americans are generally stereotyped as successful and high-achieving minorities. The "whiz kid" image of Asian-American students that is described in popular and professional literature is a misleading stereotype that masks individuality and conceals real problems. In reality, for many Asian-American students, the challenge of American schooling can be overwhelming. Some students have learning difficulties and some lack motivation, proficiency in English, or financial resources. Teachers can better understand their Asian-American students by understanding how some general cultural characteristics of Asian cultures impact their students' experience of American schooling. For example, Asian-American children may be confused by the informality that exists between teachers and students in America, and may feel considerable distress if attention is drawn to themselves in class. When developing curriculum and instruction that is culturally sensitive and methodologically adaptable to the needs of Asian-American students, teachers should: (1) familiarize themselves with the values and customs of their students' cultures; (2) learn a few words of their students' native languages; (3) base academic expectations on individual ability rather than on stereotypes; (4) use peer teaching; (5) utilize students' natural support system, including family, friends, and the community; and (6) encourage Asian parents to work with one another. (BC)

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Asian-American Children: What Teachers Should Know

Jianhua Feng

Asian-Americans constitute a significant minority in the U.S. and are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in this country, yet little is known about their particular educational needs, especially at the early childhood and elementary levels. This digest provides information to help teachers gain a better understanding of Asian-American children, particularly those from East and Southeast Asian cultures, and identify culturally appropriate educational practices to use with those children.

Asian-American Children: Who Are They?

The term Asian-American covers a variety of national, cultural, and religious heritages. Indeed, Asian-Americans represent more than 29 distinct subgroups who differ in language, religion, and customs. The four major groups of Asian-Americans are East Asian, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean; Pacific Islander; Southeast Asian, such as Thai and Vietnamese; and South Asian, such as Indian and Pakistani (Pang, 1990). Although there are similarities among the various subgroups, they have different origins, ecological adaptations, and histories.

In addition to these between-group differences, diversity exists within national groups and among individuals. Individual differences are found in reasons for migration, related hopes and expectations, and reception by the dominant culture. Some immigrants are refugees from countries torn apart by war, others from the middle class of stable countries. Some came with nothing, others with skills and affluence (Brand, 1987). Many Asian-Americans were born in the U.S. Some are fourth- or fifth-generation Americans. A disparity exists between foreign-born Asians living in this country and American-born Asians who are often quite acculturated (Hartman & Askounis, 1989).

Asian-American Children: Are They All "Whiz Kids"?

Asian-Americans are generally stereotyped as successful, law-abiding, and high-achieving minorities. The success of many Asian-American students has created a new "model minority" stereotype. They have been described in popular and professional literature as "whiz kids," and as "problem free." Some claim that Asians are smarter than other groups; others believe there is something in Asian culture that breeds success, perhaps Confucian ideas that stress family values and education (Brand, 1987). However, Asian-Americans' educational achievement cannot be attributed to natural superiority or shared cultural and family values, but rather to the interaction of those cultural and family values with social factors (Siu, 1992).

The "whiz kids" image is a misleading stereotype that masks individuality and conceals real problems. If Asian students are viewed as instant successes, there is less justification for assisting those who may need help. The result may be neglect, isolation, delinquency, and inadequate preparation for the labor market among those students. For many Asian children, the challenge of schooling can be overwhelming. Not only may American schooling contradict their own cultural system, but it may also undermine their sense of well-being and self-confidence (Trueba & Cheng, 1993) because the ethnic identity of Asian children is often based on their relation to their group. In contrast, American schooling emphasizes independence, individualism, and competition.

Asian-American children are a diverse group. Not all are superior students; some have various kinds of learning difficulties (Shen & Mo, 1990). Some lack motivation, proficiency in English, or financial resources; others have parents who do not understand the American school system because of cultural differences, language barriers, or their more immediate quest for survival (Yao, 1988). Many children, struggling with a new language and culture, drop out of school. Further, the majority of Asian-American students do not reach the starry heights of the celebrated few, and an alarming number are pushing themselves to the emotional brink in their quest for excellence (Brand, 1987; Trueba & Cheng, 1993).

Asian-American Children: How Do They Differ from Other Children?

Although diversity among Asian-American groups makes overall descriptions difficult, there are general cultural characteristics, values, and practices shared by most Asians, particularly East and Southeast Asians, that are different from the mainstream American culture.

In many East and Southeast Asian cultures, Confucian ideals, which include respect for elders, deferred gratification, and discipline, are a strong influence. Most Asian-American parents teach their children to value educational achievement, respect authority, feel responsibility for relatives, and show self-control. Asian-American

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parents tend to view school failure as a lack of will, and to address this problem by increasing parental restrictions. Asian-American children tend to be more dependent, conforming, and willing to place family welfare over individual wishes than are other American children.

Teachers in Asian culture are accorded a higher status than teachers in the United States. Asian-American children may be confused by the informality between American teachers and students and expect considerable structure and organization. Asian children tend to need reinforcement from teachers, and work more efficiently in a well-structured, quiet environment (Baruth & Manning, 1992).

Self-effacement is a trait traditionally valued in many Asian cultures. Asian children tend to wait to participate, unless otherwise requested by the teacher. Having attention drawn to oneself, for example, having one's name put on the board for misbehaving, can bring considerable distress. Many Asian children have been socialized to listen more than speak, to speak in a soft voice, and to be modest in dress and behavior.

How Can Teachers Help Asian-American Children?

Teachers can adopt practices to address problems that relate to their unfamiliarity with Asian-American cultures and to the differences that exist in Asian-American populations. When developing curriculum and instruction that are developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and methodologically adaptable, teachers should:

- Familiarize themselves with the values, traditions, and customs of various cultures; and learn the migratory conditions specific to each of their students' families. If possible, a home visit should be made to gain insight into the student's family life and support system (Baruth & Manning, 1992).
- Learn at least a few words of their Asian students' native languages. By showing such interest, teachers can set the tone for better communication. Classroom teachers should also collaborate with language professionals and ESL teachers (Trueba & Cheng, 1993).
- Encourage parents to help children maintain their native language at home, while the school helps the child attain proficiency in English. Teachers can also use English-proficient Asian students as interpreters with Asian parents.
- Base academic expectations on individual ability rather than on stereotypical beliefs.
- Alleviate the disjunctures Asian children may experience between school and home. For example, while a student may be told at school to challenge others' views, the same child may be told at home to be quiet and not challenge authority. To avoid such conflicts, teachers can organize classroom activities around naturalistic interactions that permit the child to take the lead and to build upon modeling.
- Consider peer teaching. Asian-American children who are not fluent in English may feel threatened by having to answer questions in front of the whole class. Peer tutoring can be an effective means of engaging these children in activities that foster language skills.
- Utilize the student's natural support system, including family, friends, and the community. Know who makes the decisions about education in the family, who provides care for the child after school, and, when applicable, who provides translation for the family.
- In planning instruction and activities, avoid assumptions about what the children know. For example, not all children have experienced a birthday party.
- Learn about the Asian population in their school district. Teachers can encourage parents to assist one another in serving as facilitators and informants (Trueba & Cheng, 1993), and can work with a network of Asian parents, encouraging parents established in the community to provide assistance for new arrivals.

For More Information

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